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ABSTRACT

"Looping" is an essentially simple concept: a teacher moves with his or her students to the next grade level, rather than sending them to another teacher at the end of the school year. This Digest explores the practitioners' perspectives on looping, the experience of European school systems, and research on looping. Practitioners report positive effects on both student academic achievement and parental involvement as a result of looping. Others cite time saved in skills assessment, the additional month of learning at the beginning of year two, deeper relationships developed with both students and parents, and the particular benefits afforded shy students as beneficial aspects. A looping classroom with an effective summer component also offers benefits similar to those of year-round schools with respect to momentum and continuity of instruction. Italian preschools, considered by some the best in the world, use a model of three-year assignments of students to teachers. Some German schools use multi-year teacher-student groupings for as long as 6 years, and credit the extended relationship time with assisting students in making the necessary brain connections learning requires. Research studies have found that students in multi-year programs exhibited higher reading and mathematics achievement scores on standardized tests than did students in the traditional grade organization. Teachers have also reported that teaching the same students for 3 years allowed them to use more positive approaches to classroom management. Another study found that students in an extended relationship school were less likely to report disliking school or to find it "boring." Additionally, these students outperformed their counterparts in the traditional school on basic skills tests. The only potential disadvantage of looping regularly mentioned is an inappropriate match, or personality conflict, between teacher and student--a situation that can occur in a traditional classroom as well. (LPP)

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Looping: Adding Time, Strengthening Relationships

Daniel L. Burke

"Looping" is an essentially simple concept: a teacher moves with his or her students to the next grade level, rather than sending them to another teacher at the end of the school year (Grant et al., 1996). Some loops are two consecutive years with the same group of students, while others may be three or more years with the same group. Despite enthusiastic practitioners, the experience of European school systems, and favorable research, looping is still uncommon enough in the United States to be considered *innovative* (Burke, 1996).

The available literature on looping is replete with its benefits. Students change from one grade to the next with a minimum of anxiety (Grant & Johnson, 1995). Looping provides children with additional time to build the relationships on which much of children's learning depends (Checkley, 1995; Haslinger, Kelly, & O'Lare, 1996; Lincoln, 1997; Shepro, 1995). Looping can turn parents into supporters and promotes stronger bonding between parents and teachers (National School Public Relations Association, 1995; Shepro, 1995). Looping essentially adds an extra month of teaching/learning time during the second year when the typical transitional period at the beginning of the year is virtually unnecessary (Hanson, 1995; Burke, 1996).

Practitioners' Perspectives

In Project F.A.S.T. (Families Are Students and Teachers), implemented in East Cleveland, Ohio, schools report dramatic effects on both student academic achievement and parental involvement as a result of the "extended family" aspect of looping (Hampton, Mumford, & Bond, 1997). Jacoby (1994) chronicles how her early fears of looping were quickly replaced with gratitude—she describes the time saved in skill assessment, deeper relationships developed with both students and parents, and the particular benefits afforded shy students. For teachers Mazzuchi and Brooks (1992), looping's "gift of time" is its most beneficial aspect. Teachers are able to provide appropriate activities over the longer two-year period to students who need to master certain basic skills. Jubert (1996) considers looping a parallel to a "close-knit family," and the additional month of learning at the beginning of year two, one of the "greatest benefits."

Oxley (1994) recommends dividing large schools into smaller, cross-disciplinary units, with students and teachers staying together for several years. She cites two examples of schools that have successfully utilized extended teacher–student relationships. Ziegler (1993) discusses teacher-advisory groups that remain together for three school years in grades seven through nine. She includes studies suggesting that such groups promote positive attitudes within student, teacher, and parent populations. George and Alexander (1993) argue that for middle school students, who generally need a supportive interpersonal structure, a multi-year teacher–student assignment is highly beneficial. A looping classroom with an effective summer component also offers benefits similar to those of year-round schools with respect to momentum and continuity of instruction (Grant et al., 1996; Lincoln, 1997).

European Experiences

Italian preschools, considered by some the best in the world, utilize a model of three-year assignments of students to teachers, and both parents and teachers as team members (Palestis, 1994). Some German schools utilize multi-year teacher–student groupings for as long as six years, and credit the extended relationship time with assisting students in making the necessary brain connections learning requires (Burke, 1996; Oxley, 1994; Zahorik & Dichanz, 1994). Barnes (1980) describes Waldorf education, which originated in Central Europe over 70 years ago and was brought to the United States in 1928, as a similar concept. In Waldorf education settings, one teacher and the same group of students remain together from grade one through grade eight.

Research

East Cleveland, Ohio, Schools and Cleveland State University teamed to pilot Project F.A.S.T, which included multi-year teacher–student assignments as a primary program component (Hampton, Mumford, & Bond, 1997). Students in the program exhibited substantially higher reading and mathematics achievement scores on standardized tests than did students in the traditional grade organization, even when both groups were taught *by the same teacher.* In addition to student academic gains, F.A.S.T. teachers reported an increased sense of ownership for student outcomes (both positive and negative), and a heightened sense of efficacy as a result of their increased decision-making autonomy for students. Parents reported feeling more respected by teachers, having more confidence in their children's teachers and administrators, and being more likely to seek the school's assistance with their children.

Studying a three-year teacher–student relationship, George, Spreul, and Moorefield (1987) found that approximately 70% of the teachers reported that teaching the same students for three years allowed them to use more positive approaches to classroom management. Ninety-two percent of them said that they knew more about their students, and 69% described their students as more willing to participate voluntarily in class. Eighty-five percent of the teachers reported that their students were better able to see themselves as important members of a group, to feel pride in

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that group, and to feel pride in the school as a whole. Eighty-four percent of the teachers reported more positive relationships with parents, and 75% reported increased empathy with colleagues. The reactions of students in this study were equally favorable and grew more positive with each successive grade level. Ninety-nine percent of the parents in this study, when asked, requested that their child have the same teacher as the previous year (Burke, 1996).

Milburn (1981) studied two elementary schools of similar socioeconomic areas, which were not experiencing major problems. One school used a traditional grade-level structure, and the other used an extended teacher–student relationship approach where students remained with the same teacher for more than one year. This study found that students in the extended relationship school were less likely to report disliking school or to find it "boring." Additionally, the young students in the extended relationship school outperformed their counterparts in the traditional school on basic skills tests.

Conclusion

The practice of looping offers the potential for both academic and social benefits for students. Academically, the literature includes (a) reports of improved student achievement; (b) increased time-on-task through the "extra month" of school during year two of a loop, and the potential for summer learning at the end of year one with the assignment of high interest reading and project activities; (c) more time for slower students to learn basic skills without the need for retention; and (d) more opportunities for bonding between teachers and students, and teachers and parents. The potential social benefits for students include (a) diminished apprehension about a new school year; (b) more time to establish positive peer relationships; (c) increased support for students who require school as a social safety net; (d) an enhanced sense of school and group as a "community"; and (e) increased opportunities for shy students to develop self-confidence. The only potential disadvantage of looping regularly mentioned is an inappropriate match, or personality conflict, between teacher and student—a situation that can occur in a traditional classroom as well. Such actual problems are rare (Burke, 1996) and can usually be solved by transferring those students to another teacher (Grant & Johnson, 1995).

The social interactions among adults and students are not simply a means to some other end; rather "they are education itself" (Lee et al., 1993). The essence of looping is the promotion of strong, extended, meaningful, positive interpersonal relationships between teachers and students that foster increased student motivation and, in turn, stimulate improved learning outcomes for students.

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